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ABSTRACT

A teacher used classics of children's literature to teach critical reading skills. Although scoring above the national average on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS), the teacher's fourth-grade gifted students exhibited problems with critical reading skills. A literature unit involving whole language strategies and using Beverly Cleary's "The Mouse and the Motorcycle" and E. B. White's "Charlotte's Web" was implemented. Students kept literature logs while reading and engaged in classroom discussions using questioning techniques designed to develop critical thinking skills. Vocabulary instruction focused on using context clues in the stories to determine word meaning. Students did research on spiders in cooperative learning groups, created a "fact vs. opinion" bulletin board on pigs, and used creative writing to evaluate situations and recommend solutions from a pig's point of view. Students demonstrated higher level thinking skills and became problem solvers. Students' scores on the ITBS increased remarkably as a class, but bilingual students' increases were a disappointment. (RS)

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Developing Critical Reading Skills Through Whole Language Strategies

Foundations in Reading II
Opinion Paper

Southern Nazarene University
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Robin Combs

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Developing Critical Reading Skills

Through Whole Language Strategies

Critical readers question what they read; they suspend judgement, evaluate, and decide. Critical reading is reasonable, reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do. "To make such judgements, the reader compares text with external criteria derived from experience, research, teachers, and experts in the field; therefore, background knowledge is essential to critical reading." (Roe, Stoodt, Burns, 1991). If students are to become superior thinkers, they must have the opportunity to think, interpret and evaluate. "These skills require continuity of thought and must be developed. Students need more than literal interpretation of the reading material. As has been said, students need to read the lines, read between the lines, read beyond the lines." (Orr, 1989).

Students have trouble reading beyond the printed word because of today's computer and technology oriented society. Students find that they do not know what to do with books because of the influence of television. There is a need for a fast fix. "Wanting to approach a book as they would a television set is defined as contextual confusion. Until they learn to activate the

internal eye, their critical, evaluative, and interpretive skills will be lacking" (Orr, 1989).

Critical reading is an interactive process which uses several levels of thought simultaneously. Being a critical reader requires that a student make observations, produce inferences and form hypotheses. "These are also characteristics of good problem solvers. Problem solving strategies give the teacher a framework for critical reading skills and give the student useful tools for acquiring new information in a new situation." (Flynn, 1987)

The critical reader must have background experience that provides a basis for making judgements. "The critical reading task should be approached with an open-minded, problem-solving attitude. Critical readers should constantly ask questions about the text they are reading." (Roe et all., 1991) Research suggests that reading skills should be related to the books and writing of the children. "Integration of reading and writing is recommended, good questioning techniques, and improved class discussion should be used to encourage the development of critical-thinking" (Angeletti, 1990).

In order to improve critical reading skills it is

necessary for teachers to take charge of their reading program. Generations of teachers have been awed by the technology of reading. This has led some teachers to mistrust their own professional judgement. They were forced to put their trust in the anonymous experts who write the reading workbooks; believing those experts knew what was best for their class.

A strategy for reading referred to as whole language tries to integrate, not fragment, the reading process. Three important research findings influencing the whole language approach are:

1) Kids already know a lot about writing language before they come to school. If students are expected to read what is meaningful, functional and relevant they will learn the material.

2) The knowledge children have before they read strongly influences how much they will understand when they read. Teachers can use special techniques to get students interested in a story before they begin reading.

3) Reading and writing help each other to develop. Themantic units are being used because children learn language while they use language to learn.

Choice by learner is stressed in the whole language approach and importance of learners feeling a sense of power in developing their reading and writing skills. It's important to remember to tap into the particular interest of each child, and to treat each student as a winner in the reading game. Interest in books will be varied (Goodman, 1987).

Research has suggested that real literature comes from real life and students can respond to those experiences. "An ideal program would be woven around books with skills and group work intertwined with the books that students were reading. The ultimate goal would be for students to think of books as friends to guide, support and inspire them." (Orr, 1989).

Another concept is using novels in place of basals. In a program called "new improved critical reading" the teacher used classics to teach critical reading skills. "The basis for this approach is that students cannot move to higher level thinking skills without viewing things from different perspectives which isolated tasks from basals will not allow." (Orr, 1989).

Implementation

The Iowa Test of Basic Skills Tests results from

the Fall of 1991 showed students in fourth grade gifted class scored in the fifty fifth percentile in critical reading areas of vocabulary, language and reading skills subtests. As a school, Wheeler students scored in the thirty-fifth percentile in vocabulary, reading and language skills on the I.T.B.S. The fourth grade gifted class scored in the fifty-fifth percentile, while the national average was in the forty-ninth percentile. Even though the gifted class score was above average nationwide there was a problem with critical reading skills to be addressed by the classroom teacher. These students previous reading instruction has been through a basal text and workbook. A literature unit involving whole language strategies using the books The Mouse and the Motorcycle by Beverly Cleary and Charlotte's Web by E.B. White were chosen for implementation. All instructions and activities were based on Bloom's Taxonomy.

In The Mouse and the Motorcycle students were assigned chapters to read, and kept a literature log of new words for discussion in class. In class discussion of assigned reading, questioning techniques were used to develop critical thinking skills. This method relates

skills instruction to books and writing of the students.

Whole-class instruction for skills development will allow for class discussion, which encourages development of critical thinking. Students listen to teach other's ideas and confirm their own answers or decide to change their own predictions (Angeletti, 1990). Vocabulary instruction focused in on using context clues in the story to determine word meaning. This process was modeled by the teacher in class discussions. By the end of The Mouse and the Motorcyle students were successfully using context clues to determine word meaning and developing some critical thinking skills; they were becoming problem solvers. The conclusion of this book was a book written by the students titled, The Further Adventures of Ralph. Each student was responsible for one chapter in the book, and the characters must remain true to the changes in their development in the original book.

Now that the students had been given the opportunity to think, interpret and evaluate we continued on with the children's classic Charlotte's Web by E.B. White. Now that critical thinking skills had been modeled and discussed in class, the students were now ready to

demonstrate their high level thinking process through writing. "Critical readers should be able to recognize the author's purpose and point of view, distinguishing fact from opinion." (Roe, et.al., 1991). This was accomplished with students keeping a "Fern's Diary" to write about the characters reaction to specific events in the story. As critical readers they were constantly asking questions about the text they were reading. Individual reading conferences enabled the teacher to discuss the diary entry with the writer and through revisions the writers were able to describe the interpretation of story events through the eyes of the character Fern.

The Literature Log was again used to record unfamiliary words; the students also kept a record of new characters and the setting of the chapters. During class discussion of new words, students again used context clues to determine word meaning, using the dictionary as a final authority. The students were now excited about the fact that they could now determine the meaning of a new word without having to rely only on the dictionary. New words were added to the class Word Chain which has now wrapped around the classroom,

down the stairs and past the cafeteria. The Word Chain was started at the first of school and has new words from all subject areas included in it.

Students were given a blank calendar on which to chart developments in the story with symbols or pictures. Example:

A "Book of Miracles" was also used to report on the significance of these events to the story. "Spider Studies" research was done in cooperative learning groups and reported to the class on charts. A bulletin board for the hall was created to illustrate "Pig Facts: Fact vs. Opinion" by the students. Pigmania creative writing center had students evaluating different situations from a pig's point of view and recommending solutions through creative writing.

Most students in this setting had previously read Charlotte's Web but demonstrated no critical thinking ability about the book before the strategies were modeled. Their knowledge of the book was literal. The students

now approach all reading from a different perspective. They are excited about the various ways we can now express our knowledge. The students had always been avid readers, but could never given any information or interpretation of their book that wasn't literal. For the students the literature unit was a success.

Conclusion

As an instructor I felt the program a huge success from the demonstration of the high level thinking occuring in the related activities and class discussion. The students had become problem solvers. The implementation of the whole language strategies had occured over a three month period. Spring Iowa Tests were completed the first week in April. This would be the real test of the strategies used in the literature approach.

Results of the I.T.B.S. for the class were a thirteen percent gain in vocabulary (68), and a thirteen percent increase in reading and language subskills (68). Nationally the gifted fourth grade class increased their ranking by ten percent to a fifty-ninth percentile in vocabulary. In reading and language subskills their increase was by nine percent resulting in a sixtieth percentile ranking.

As a school, Wheeler students increased their

score by fifteen percent to a fiftieth percentile in vocabulary. Reading and language subskills increased by fourteen percent to the fifty-first percentile. This is an incredible accomplishment for the staff and students considering the socio-economic area Wheeler serves.

Comparing test results in this manner helps the instructor to determine the effectiveness of their teaching using a whole language approach. Individual students increased their critical thinking skills in varying degrees. While bilingual students successfully demonstrated critical reading skills in class, their increase on the I.T.B.S. individual scores was a disappointment.

These students now have a strong foundation in critical reading. Progress in the critical reading will continue with a whole language strategy approach in their future reading instruction. As an instructor my goal was to build a foundation which would be added to in the students future reading instruction. My goals were to teach critical reading skills with whole language strategies for long term growth in problem solving abilities.

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